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ARE THE MOVIES A MENACE TO THE DRAMA?

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

IN *The Story of a Play*, which is one of the most amusing as it is one of the most brilliant of American novels dealing with theatrical life and which reveals a most sympathetic insight into the sinuosities of the histrionic temperament, Mr. Howells lets the author of the play (who is half his hero), say something to the actor (who is the other half) which the latter receives with immediate approval: "The drama is literature that makes a double appeal; it appeals to the senses as well as to the intellect,—and the stage half the time is only a picture-frame." From a mere man of letters who was engaged in plotting his first play this was a surprising admission. It was a recognition of the indisputable fact that the drama and the show business are integrally and intimately related, and the eyes and the ears of the spectators must be entertained while the mind is being satisfied and the feelings are being moved.

In other words, a play to please the main body of the public must be first of all an effective story with its own special kind of picturesqueness. A French critic is credited with asserting that "the skeleton of every good play is a pantomime"—a saying which is not quite true although it contains a large proportion of truth. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and *Othello* the visible actions of the characters almost interpret themselves; and a performance of any one of the three would probably hold the attention of the average spectator even if he were so placed that he could not benefit by the dialogue. To Elizabethan playgoers Shakespeare's masterpieces were primarily good stories picturesquely set forth. Succeeding generations have discovered in Shakespeare's plays other and loftier merits than were perceived by his contemporaries in the opening years of the seventeenth century.

Now, in the opening years of the twentieth century there has been invented a new method of picturesque story-telling, which has already exhibited wholly unsuspected possibilities. At the present moment the art of the moving-picture is in process of rapid evolution; and we cannot yet foresee what its ultimate limitations will prove to be. What we can perceive clearly is that it has already been accepted by not a few observers as a dangerous rival of the drama; it has captured many theatres; it has enlisted in its service an army of actors and actresses; and it has captivated a host of men and women and children of whom many have probably been more or less habitual playgoers. How far is this apparent rivalry of the wordless moving-picture and the spoken drama to extend? Are the movies actually a menace to the drama? Is there any real danger that the primary art of the playwright and the secondary art of the player will be damaged if not destroyed by the continuous and increasing competition of the cinematograph? These questions are insistent; they are important; and they are not easy to answer.

In a plaintive and almost despondent paper Mr. Howells has expressed his grief that the art of the theatre is "now, apparently threatened by the gross and palpable triumph of the picture-show." He declared that the moving-picture "goes to the theatre, that home of the most beautiful art, and bids against it for the artists' liberty, their individuality, their initiative . . . From men and women it turns them to automaton . . . [It] buys their beauty and their power for a moment of the film, extinguishing the soul in them." And finally he asked: "Will the capitalized black art corrupt the dramatist as it has corrupted the actor? As yet it does not seem so . . . As yet the movie demands nothing of the dramatist." To be noted however is Mr. Howells's earlier admission that "the worst of it is that no one can deny the wonder of this new form of the world-old mime. It is of a truly miraculous power and scope; there seems nothing that it cannot do,—except convince the taste and console the spirit."

The questions Mr. Howells asked have been asked by many other lovers of the drama shocked at the invasion of the theatre by spectacles which do not convince the taste or console the spirit. This is a good occasion therefore to point out once more that the theatre and the drama are not the same thing; the moving-picture might take over half

the playhouses in the United States and still exert scarcely any influence upon the drama itself. The drama is an art, perhaps the loftiest and most powerful of the arts; and the theatre is a commercial enterprise. Of course, the drama cannot prosper unless it is on a sound economic basis; and for this it must always depend on the theatre. But the theatre can get along without the drama; it can for example rely on the review, the so-called comic opera, the summer song-show in which there is little or no trace of the essentially dramatic; it can fill out its programme with song and dance, with acrobatics, with trained animals, with sidewalk conversationalists, with jugglers and conjurers, and with all the other possibilities of the variety-show. In so far as the moving-picture has forced itself into a prominent place among these non-dramatic entertainments, it is not in any way invading the field of the drama, and therefore it is not to be considered as a competitor.

But the moving-picture has done more than this: it has of late been bold enough to "picturize"—if that is to be the new word describing a new thing—popular plays, popular novels, and popular operas. It has made these picturizations long enough to provide entertainment for a whole evening. And it has discovered that it can present a story with an amplitude of effect not possible in the theatre. It has at its command resources impossible to the regular drama. Where the dramatist has to content himself by telling the audience how the hero saved the heroine's life by catching her runaway horse or by snatching her from before the locomotive or bringing her down from the burning building, the director of the moving-picture is able to show the heroic deed itself, visible to all the spectators.

Where Shakespeare on his restricted platform-stage could command only "three back-swords to eke a battle out," the moving-picture director can go into the open and manœuvre in a vast and indefinite perspective hundreds and thousands of men and horses and guns, with shells bursting and ammunition-wagons exploding. Where Othello hints at his hairbreadth escapes in the imminent deadly flood, and can do no more than hint at them, leaving the rest to the alert imagination of the Elizabethan audiences, the makers of the movies set before us the deadly flood itself and force us to be actual spectators of the hairbreadth escape. There are a multitude of things which the drama can do only in-

completely and with difficulty and which the movies can do easily and superbly. So far as mere pictorial story-telling is concerned the drama is simply outclassed; and the drama has hitherto had a monopoly of pictorial story-telling—a monopoly which it found very profitable.

One swift result of the advent of the moving-picture was the demise of the ultra-sensational melodrama, a tissue of thrilling adventures, often ingeniously contrived but nearly always devoid of any direct relation to human life as it really is. The illiterate playgoers who could find satisfaction in these arbitrarily concocted plots, wherein probability, plausibility and verisimilitude were continually sacrificed to unexpectedly startling effect, had their callous nerves more effectively stimulated and their crude tastes more deeply gratified by the melodramatic tales which could be told on the screen with far greater effectiveness. The relish for beholding violent adventure, for watching villainies plotted, and accomplished or thwarted, for impending terror and horror, is deep rooted in the baser instincts of man; and it sated itself in Rome in the gladiatorial combat and in Spain in the bull-fight. Thus it is that the makers of the movies, having killed off the crudely sensational melodrama, find their profit in supplying picture-stories of exactly the same kind.

Perhaps it is going a little too far to assert that the disappearance of the ultra-sensational melodrama is due solely to the competition of the moving-picture which can present the same kind of story with a far greater wealth of detail. Yet it is beyond question that the movie can satisfy the ruder likings of the mob for coarse-grained happenings far more successfully than the most inventive and ingenious stage-manager can ever hope to do. But while melodrama has had a long and interesting history, it is not one of the higher and more important forms of the drama. Indeed, it is frankly an inferior form because it contents itself with story-telling for its own sake, never hesitating to sacrifice character to situation. Its appeal is to the emotions but mainly to the senses, and more especially to the nerves, whereas true drama, the drama comic or serious, which is really worth while, appeals both to the emotions and to the intellect; it uses situation mainly to reveal character.

In a melodrama or in a farce we are interested very much in what happens and very little in the persons to whom these misadventures happen. In a comedy or in a tragedy we are

interested mainly in the persons themselves, in what they are rather than in what they do. However powerful the situations may be in which they are immeshed, we are always watching them to see how their characters are going to react and to reveal themselves under the stress of unforeseen circumstance. In melodrama and in farce we are quite satisfied to find characters painted in the primary colors, by a few bold strokes, presented in profile as it were, whereas in comedy and tragedy we expect the rotundity of real life, the complexity, the delicate colors and the finer shadings of a subtler art. We demand from the dramatist who essays the higher forms that he shall be able to "convince the taste and console the spirit." And Mr. Howells was right when he declared that this was precisely what the moving picture could not do. So long therefore as it labors under this total disability the moving picture can never be a real rival of the drama.

Certain kinds of melodrama the movies can do better than the regular theatre; certain kinds of farce also. But comedy and tragedy are wholly beyond its reach; and equally unattainable by it are the social drama and the problem-play. It is true, of course, that the moving-picture director can take comedy and tragedy, social drama and problem-play and that he can translate them on the screen; but what has he succeeded in presenting? The mere story, the empty sequence of events, void of nearly all the humanity that gives it meaning. He can take *Hamlet* and put it into pictures but he has to leave out all that lifted *Hamlet* above the violent melodrama out of which Shakespeare made it. He can take *Macbeth*, which has a good story picturesquely set forth, and he can show the succession of incidents with the utmost splendor. But he cannot show what gives all its value to this external shell of episode. He can make visible the marching of Macduff's army, and the coming of Birnam Wood, but he cannot disclose the conflict in the soul of Macbeth himself; he cannot make us shudder at the slow and steady disintegration of a noble character under the stress of recurring temptation. All that the moving-picture can do to a masterpiece of Shakespeare is to rob it of its vitality and its significance and to reduce it to the purely spectacular level of *The Birth of a Nation* and of the "gross and palpable" triumphs of the "black art," as Mr. Howells has termed it.

To the extent that the drama is only picturesque storytelling it cannot compete with the movies; but the movies cannot compete with the drama in dealing with the soul of man in its manifold struggles with itself. "The reel"—to quote Mr. Howells once more—"asks no co-operation of the intellect for the enjoyment of the events thrown upon the screen." And the drama is the noblest of the arts precisely because it does demand the co-operation of the intellect at the very moment when it is appealing to the emotions and when it is gratifying the senses.

When a play is put upon the screen it is necessarily reduced to the pantomime which should be no more than its supporting skeleton, and it has necessarily to be stripped of its flesh—of all that made it more than a mere story. This is why the picturization of the finer kinds of drama will always be inadequate and unsatisfactory. And this is why, again, the shrewder of the makers of moving-pictures are strenuously seeking for original stories, invented by men who have mastered the new art of telling tales by visual means alone, who can devise plots in complete accord with the marvelous possibilities of this new art and who can so plan them as to minimize the disadvantages of its strict and inexorable limitations. In the hands of these pioneers of the picture-play, the new art is finding itself as it proceeds to get further and further away from the processes needful in the spoken drama and not needed in the ampler area open before the deviser of a plot for the film. As the new art explores its own field more searchingly and as it discovers its own latent possibilities,—many of which are probably still unsuspected,—it is likely to diverge more and more from the method of the drama and to attain a technique of its own which will serve to differentiate it still more sharply. It can do this only by frankly accepting its limitations and by seeking to turn them to its advantage, for the true artist is forever making stumbling blocks into stepping-stones. Whenever the moving-picture is able to accomplish this, it will cease even to appear to be a rival of the drama.

Certain of the inexorable limitations of the story told on the screen by visual means alone have already been dwelt upon. They are obvious and irremovable. They forbid the deviser of a picture-play to do much more than tell a story picturesquely. He must eschew all psychologic subtlety; he must be satisfied with characters which can be presented

in profile; he must be simple and clear, swift and direct. Above all, he must, so far as this may be possible, do without words. The spoken word he cannot have; and the printing of passages of dialogue, however brief and however pointed, is always an interruption to the flow of the action picturesquely represented. These passages of dialogue nearly always interfere with the progress of the pictorial narrative; and they have the further disadvantage that to accomplish their purpose they must anticipate the moment when they are supposed to be spoken,—a transposition which is unnatural. In real life gesture either precedes speech or accompanies it.

As yet the makers of moving-pictures have not been able to overcome this disadvantage and to devise a story which should be transparently comprehensible without the aid of the printed word. When we recall *L'Enfant Prodigue* and *Sumurun* and other wordless plays, which were not difficult to follow, we need not doubt that it will be found possible to put together plots for the screen in which there will be no need of printed dialogue or of any other explanation than the pictures themselves, the story being so simple that it will be self-explanatory. It is true, of course, that the range of the art of pantomime is sharply circumstricted; and yet within that little space there have been produced not a few masterpieces.

It is because the moving-picture has perforce to do without the potent appeal of the spoken word that it can never be really a rival of the drama. It is only by the aid of dialogue and soliloquy that we can peer into the recesses of the human soul. The Greeks, so the late Professor Butcher told us in his luminous essay on "The Written and the Spoken Word," held that not only the drama, but the epic also (which was originally composed for oral delivery), "depended, if not for their existence, at least for their vitality on the living voice and the listening crowds." Even today we do not really possess a poem until we have heard it; it demands the test of the ear; and it does not reveal its hidden beauties to the eye alone. When we listen to a pregnant speech of one of Shakespeare's characters, spoken on the stage by an actor who has a noble voice and who knows how to use it, the words take on a richer meaning and have a vitality and a significance unsuspected before.

As the moving-picture is deprived of the aid of words, it

cannot be literature. As it is deprived of the aid of the human voice, it takes from the actor his most powerful resource. It demands only that its performers shall be able to make the gestures indicate and to "register" the emotions called for; and although it is luring to its aid not a few actors of prominence, it is often finding that they are not always as satisfactory when seen on the screen as novices young enough to be able to respond to the summary training which the movie-directors can bestow hurriedly in their own studios.

Pantomime is only one of the means of expression at the command of a competent actor; and when he is suddenly forced to deprive himself of all his other means and to limit himself to what can be expressed by gesture and by grimace, he is likely to reveal himself as sore bereft. When the late Augustin Daly brought out *L'Enfant Prodigue* he cast Ada Rehan as Pierrot, and as that accomplished actress had no experience in pantomime, she was often painfully circumscribed and wholly unable to achieve the large and sweeping result which we admired in her Katherine and in her Rosalind. It is notorious that one of the most intelligent of American actresses was a blank failure when she played one of her most famous parts for the films. And on the other hand, a leading American opera singer was unusually successful when she undertook to represent the heroine of a popular opera before the screen; and her success was due to the fact that as music is more leisurely than speech, the operatic actress has perforce to acquire a habit of retarding and enlarging her gestures, which was exactly suited to the limitations of the moving-picture.

It is likely that the differentiation between the real play (which must have a story, no doubt, but which has also a soul) and the picture-play (which can never be more than a story told in pictures) will increase and become more obvious as the managers of the movies cease to borrow the plots of plays and devote themselves to stories compounded in accord with the possibilities and the limitations of their own special art. As they accept these limitations and as they develop these possibilities the apparent rivalry between the drama and the moving-picture will lessen, and each will be left in possession of its own special field.

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